A fine phonological history lesson

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Donka Minkova, *A Historical Phonology of English*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014. Pp. xvi + 424. Paperback £24.99, ISBN 9780748634682

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How can we work out what speakers of English sounded like in the past? Or, to put it another way: what do we know about the phonological history of English? This magnificent book gives a good insight into the vast amount that we know about the phonological changes that have affected English during its history, and also into the cases where we suspect that specific changes must have had certain characteristics, but cannot be completely sure of the details.

English has been well served by historical 'handbooks', summarising and advancing our understanding of its phonological history, since the start of systematic historical linguistics in the nineteenth century. Minkova's volume takes a firm place in this tradition (alongside volumes like Sievers 1882, Wright & Wright 1908, Luick 1914-1940, Campbell 1959, Dobson 1968 and Hogg 1992), but it can also stake a claim to be unique: it focuses only on phonology (unlike many of the aforementioned, which also address other linguistic levels), it says something about the entire history of English (rather than focusing on one period), and it is intended at least in part as a textbook, so it aims to be accessible to those who have only a basic grounding in linguistics. A remarkable feature of the book is that it succeeds in presenting material in a way that should interest and intrigue any student who is willing to engage with questions about how and why the phonology of English has changed, but it also contains material that will be of interest to specialists, in places presenting (or at least synthesising) novel arguments concerning the understanding of specific changes.

It would be impossible to say something about *all* changes that have occurred in *all* varieties of English. Minkova aims to "compare two admittedly highly variable end-points, P[resent]D[ay]E[nglish] and O[ld]E[nglish], and ... isolate and focus on processes which have contributed to the shape of the modern system" (p.153). In terms of PDE, she focuses on RP/Standard Southern British English and General American (which "are widely recognised and can be easily related to varieties spoken outside the narrow confines of the 'standards'." p.18). This is a reasonable restriction, and it does not mean that the book avoids all discussion of other varieties, or of the dialectal diversity that existed at earlier stages of the language, such as OE. There are thus, however, many changes which occurred in varieties which did not go on to form these 'standards', which could not be fitted into discussion.

Given the large number of changes that *are* considered, it would also not be possible to say everything about them (thus, on I-Mutation: "[w]e will not cover all the specifics here; the goal of the section is to present a simplified account of

the mechanism and scope of the process..." p.157). The reader will not be left unintrigued or uninformed by the details that are provided about each change, though, and many changes are considered in real detail. In any case, there is guidance on further reading on many topics in the book's 'appendix', which is freely available on its companion website (www.euppublishing.com/page/etoteladvanced/minkova). The appendix also contains further discussion of some of the phenomena considered (and not considered) in the volume – largely featuring material which could not be squeezed into the book itself. It is something of a shame that this material could not be accommodated within the book but it is good that it is not lost to us, and the volume is already a hefty 440 pages without the appendix (much longer than any other title in the *Edinburgh Textbooks on the English Language* series in which it appears). The appendix also contains exercises and activities, which will help to make the book useful as a university course text.

Chapter 1 provides a neat and up to date potted external history of English, and discusses the basics of English periodisation, showing how it is problematic but useful to divide the language's history into periods like Old and Middle English; it also has some sensible words about the types of evidence that we have for historical phonology. Chapter 2 reinforces the book's status as a textbook: it introduces fundamental phonetic and phonological concepts such as place of articulation, geminacy and syllable weight – while this may not be necessary for many readers, the discussion includes some astute observations about phonology which provide a good basis for the main sections of the book to come; the chapter's final section is a valuable and concise introduction to 'types and causes' of phonological change.

There follow three chapters which largely or exclusively deal with consonantal change and then three which focus on vowel changes. The first of these, chapter 3, is not only about consonant changes, though – it sets out the Indo-European and Germanic prehistory of English – but it has a consonantal flavour as it considers changes like Grimm's Law and the West Germanic Gemination in some detail. Chapters 4 and 5 are explicitly focused on consonantal developments in OE and the "second millennium" of English, respectively. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 cover vowel changes in Old, Middle and subsequent periods. Chapter 9 shifts focus from segmental phonology to consider changes in the English stress system, and chapter 10 offers a history of English verse forms – while interesting in its own right, Minkova shows (both in this chapter and by references to relevant data throughout the book) how alliterative verse, rhyme and metre can offer persuasive evidence for previous stages of the phonology of a language.

The book is no dull recitation of facts. It questions received wisdom in some cases where the author argues that (most or all) previous work has missed the point (for example "a solid empirical premise for positing trisyllabic shortening as an active shortening process at any time in Old or Middle English is missing" p. 217), but Minkova does not push her own analyses where there is genuine debate about the interpretation of specific types of diachronic data (even in cases where she herself has made insightful contributions to the debate, as in the case of 'Middle English Open Syllable Lengthening', for example). It is exciting that Minkova discusses the basis of our evidence for earlier stages of phonology and also flags up where there is room for new research. There is obviously room for

research into ongoing changes (phonological history is not just in the past!) but we can also learn more about ancient changes where new data or new ways of interpreting old data become available, or where certain potential leads have simply never been followed (for example on p. 124: "[w]hile we can subsume early /r/-loss in coda clusters under the general umbrella of assimilation, many questions remain: the nature of the rhotic in various dialects, the exact distribution of /-rC/ forms, the position of the cluster – within the same syllable, stressed or unstressed, or straddling two adjacent syllables – the relevance of lexical frequency, are some of the areas that await further research"). Historical Phonology in general is a vibrant field of linguistics with firm foundations in classic issues relating to our understanding of change, and with new methodological techniques and theoretical frameworks constantly developing (see, for example, Honeybone & Salmons 2015). Minkova shows a keen awareness of recent work in both contemporary phonology and contemporary historical linguistics, all of which can shed new light on the phonological history of English, with a wide range of references in the book to both classic and current publications.

The book is clearly written and thoroughly readable. Each of the chapters in the core of the book (chapters 3-9) have 'teaser' words as a subtitle (for example, FOOT-FEET, FULL-FILL, MAN-MEN, CHILD-CHILDREN, HOUND-HUNDRED in chapter 6), the diachronic relationships between which are explained somewhere in the chapter (for example, I-Mutation explains why *foot* and *feet* have different vowels, and lengthening explains why *child* and *children* do). This shows the general atmosphere that the book evokes, always trying to intrigue and engage the reader – this includes providing explanations for why English spelling now has many non-phonological characteristics, and tips on how to read out OE.

This book is the crowning glory of Minkova's intensive work on the history of English during a long (and ongoing) career. While established researchers on the topics discussed may find details to disagree with, they will also get a vast amount from reading it and will find in it new leads to pursue. It should also stimulate generations of new researchers in the field for decades to come.

References

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